

Does the Rise of the Global Sex Industry Represent Progress or Failure for Feminism?

Introduction

A recent article entitled, 'Banning the Sex Industry: Naked Ambition' (*Economist*, 2013) shows the debate surrounding this polemic issue is as alive now as it was at the end of the 19th Century. As some governments take increasing measures to try curb the growth of the sex sector (CATW, 2011), radical feminists view this as a progressive step for 'feminism'. Nevertheless this progress could be said to be undermined by the continued rise of the global sex industry (GSI). In contrast, 'sex work' feminists suggest that the globalization of the sex trade *is* in a fact positive step. This essay will explore the debate between radical and sex work feminists in regard to the rise of the GSI and whether it represents progress or failure for feminism. It will be argued that this rise is largely a failure on the grounds that it is based upon a flawed acceptance of underlying gendered hierarchies of power and fails to fully identify structural limits to agency. This will be done by first examining the definition of the GSI and the grounds for feminists' opposing positions, before assessing whether the normalization of the sex industry, and the potential for legalisation, represents progress or failure. Finally, the claim that the rise of the GSI facilitates progress for feminism- by enhancing some women's ability to exercise economic and sexual agency- will be evaluated. Although it is recognised that males are an overlooked category (see Dennis, 2008) this essay will follow the dominant academic trend by focusing on women.

Defining the Global Sex Industry and Feminist Stances

In order to determine whether the globalization of the sex industry represents progress or failure for feminism, it will first be necessary to define key concepts. Generally, the GSI can be seen as the commercial exchange of all physical (e.g. prostitution) and/or sexually stimulating (i.e. stripping and pornography) goods and services for material compensation; including not only workers but also the managers, agencies and clubs that facilitate such enterprises (Agustín, 2005b; Weitzer, 2010). Yet whether the industrialization of sex, that is to say the, “mass production of goods and services for exchange on the market” (Barry, 1995: 122), and the globalization of this commodity, is seen as progress or failure for feminism is influenced by feminists’ different conceptualizations of sex.

Since the rise of liberal feminism in the 1970s, two main feminist groups have emerged which, largely due to their differing conceptualisations of sex, hold opposing views regarding the commercialization of the GSI. On the one hand, the “empowerment paradigm” (Weitzer, 2010: 5) is supported by the pro-sex work alliance of liberal, socialist and post-colonial feminists (Jeffreys, 2009). Arguing that they represent the true perspective of a variety of active sex workers (Doezema, 1998; Murray, 1998), they suggest that commercial sexual exchanges between consenting adults should not be viewed as a moral issue. Instead the selling of sex should be regarded as a product or service that is no different from other legitimate forms of labour (Sullivan, 2003; Weitzer, 2007, 2010). Although they recognise that not all prostitution is voluntary, advocates support the legalisation of sex work for those who choose it and those who migrate to do so. From this perspective the industrialization and expansion of the GSI is seen as a positive development.

On the other hand, radical feminists conceptualise sex in terms of power- more specifically, male power over women (Barry, 1995: 9). Advocates of this approach support the complete

destruction of the GSI in order to prevent the sexual exploitation of women (Outshoorn, 2005). Furthermore, they employ the term “prostitution”, collating the various sectors of the sex industry, as an alternative to the neutral term ‘sex work’; which they view as unduly legitimizing, while concomitantly obscuring the physical and mental harms of, the GSI (Jeffreys, 2009). Advocates of this “sexual domination discourse” (Outshoorn, 2005: 145) conceptualise prostitution as the epitome of female oppression and subordination (Jeffreys, 2009). In short, radical feminists believe that the GSI constitutes a form of sexual exploitation that is, “a political condition and the base from which discrimination against women is constructed and enacted” (Barry, 1995: 11). Accordingly, radicals do not believe in ‘voluntary’ prostitution because within the established unequal, gendered hierarchies of power, women are not presented with real choice (Barry, 1995; Jeffreys, 2009). Still, both sides could be criticised for essentialising by assuming the inherent nature of the male sex drive (Outshoorn, 2005). On the one hand, sex work feminists unquestioningly accept its omnipresence because it fuels the demand for the GSI. On the other, radicals treat the sex industry as monolithic; that there is no variance in the level of exploitation faced by different women and that sex is always a male dominated power relationship.

The Rise of the Global Sex Industry: Normalization to Women's Rights?

Having defined the GSI, and examined the contrasting feminist positions, it will now be possible to assess whether its rise can be considered progress or failure for feminism. The rise of the GSI could be interpreted as a progressive step from the sex work perspective, while a major blow for radicals. Analysts from both sides of the debate agree that reliable statistics regarding the extent and worth of this sector are difficult to obtain, though it is generally accepted that the sex industry is a rising and proliferating, multibillion dollar market (Agustín, 2005b; Barry, 1995; Sanders, 2008; Jeffreys, 2009; Weitzer, 2010). This is supported by what scant data is available. To illustrate, in the US, in 1985 \$75 million was spent on pornography, but by 2006 this had risen to \$957 million (Weitzer, 2010: 2). Similarly, in the UK, the number of men who admitted having paid for heterosexual sex rose from 5.6% in 1990 to 8.8% by 2000 (Ward *et al*, 2005: 468). Likewise, other areas of the sex industry have expanded, becoming increasingly accepted as mainstream leisure pursuits (Sanders, 2008). Although the GSI is not yet normalized, Weitzer's (2010) study regarding attitudes towards the legalization of prostitution suggests there has been a perceivable increase in tolerance.

From the sex work perspective, the process of normalization can contribute towards the legalisation the sex industry as a legitimate economic sector. This is viewed as a desirable outcome because government regulation would further the possibility of workers gaining labour rights- and thus protection under international law- that would in turn reduce the risks associated with working in the GSI and improve conditions (Bindman, 1998; Sullivan, 2003; Agustín, 2005a). Rather than banning prostitution on socially constructed moral grounds, a regulated sex trade would have the practical advantage of providing a solution to the problems of both the legitimate and the illicit sex trade (Agustín, 2005a; Weitzer, 2007); thereby reducing the risk to those who voluntarily enter the industry, whilst simultaneously

providing help for those who were coerced (Agustín, 2005a; Outshoorn, 2005). Sex work advocates argue that the problems faced by prostitutes are similar to those faced in other low status jobs, but are amplified because of cultural stigmas, discrimination and criminalization (Sullivan, 2003): problems are thus seen as being related to conditions, rather than to the nature of the job itself (Outshoorn, 2005).

Nonetheless the position taken by sex work advocates could be considered one of “resigned tolerance” (Agustín, 2005b: 618). Rather than viewing the normalization of the sex industry as progression, arguably it is ultimately counterproductive to accept and capitalise upon an essentialised male sex drive (Outshoorn, 2005; Jeffreys, 2009) which “stem[s] from the construction of heterosexual masculinity, [and] expectations to be an active sexual male” (Sanders, 2008: 195). In other words, a man’s right to sex and its procurement are social constructions that underpin the GSI. As such, pro-sex work feminists can be criticized for failing to question the male demand for sex. As a result, instead of empowering prostitutes, increasing normalization further entrenches established hierarchies of gender inequality. This is itself a continuous process: once women are working within the sex trade, their relevant position of subordination is repeatedly entrenched. To illustrate, Penttinen’s (2010: 35) study of strippers in Finland, where “the commercial sex culture became legalized in...the 1990s as a result of libertarian ideology”, shows how migrant women were paradoxically socially constructed as being both sexually deviant and exotic ‘others’, whilst simultaneously performing the traditional role of a female carer. In a similar way, Scambler (2007) highlights the stigmatization of deviant female prostitutes, but not their male clients, and recognises the emotional labour that prostitutes are expected to perform. Consequently, the rise and normalization of the GSI reinforces existing unequal gender hierarchies and propagates the continuation of sexual exploitation and the oppression of women.

Furthermore, it is not clear that the normalization of the GSI is leading to progressive changes in terms of women's rights. As a study of the Netherlands suggests, there has been no perceivable decrease in the illicit sex trade despite the legalisation of brothels (Hubbard *et al*, 2008). As such, the normalization and legalization of the GSI may not provide the defence against exploitation that sex work advocates propose. Instead, the championing of labour rights can be viewed as a 'sticking plaster' solution, treating the symptoms but not the causes of gender inequality. By prioritising labour rights, the sex work perspective fails to challenge the dominant hierarchies of power that deny women their basic human rights to "dignity, equality, autonomy, and physical and mental well-being" (Hughes, 2000: 36; Barry, 1995), which are forfeited for the sexual gratification of male perpetrators.

Women's Economic and Sexual Agency

A key argument for the progress of feminism, advanced by the sex work position, is that the rise of the GSI allows women to exercise their rights to both economic and sexual agency to overcome inequalities. Advocates are positive about globalization because it facilitates female migration, both within the state and internationally, allowing women to work in a sector that pays more money than other low skilled jobs (Kligman and Limoncelli, 2005; Hubbard *et al*, 2008). To illustrate, recent studies of the UK and the EU suggest that the majority of prostitutes are migrants (Scambler, 2007; Hubbard *et al*, 2008). Similarly, Wright's (2004: 380) study of Mexican female sex workers suggests that after migrating from poor rural areas, urban prostitutes were able to act as "independent entrepreneurs" by controlling their own prices and working hours. Thus, through a woman's ability to raise her own income, it could be argued that her dependence upon men is decreased (Phoenix, 2007).

This apparent agency in choosing to work in the sex industry has led sex work advocates to criticise what they perceive to be the radical view that all prostitutes and migrants are victims of sexual exploitation and trafficking. Instead they stress how some women choose to work in the GSI, seeing it as an opportunity to earn more money by actively responding to the rise in Western demand (Berman, 2003). Though not denying that exploitation does exist, many have argued that it is problematic to classify all sex workers as victims and research suggests that not all feel exploited (Berman, 2003; Agustín, 2005b; Weitzer, 2007). This claim is bolstered by the post-colonial feminist stance that the unquestioning victimization of poor, female migrants is inherently racist (Kempadoo, 1998; Berman, 2003; Outshoorn, 2005). They argue that this is a view taken by predominantly white, western feminists who assume the naivety of migrant women and their concomitant coercion into sex work. In support of this position, Weitzer's (2007) study of 100 Vietnamese migrant sex workers shows that only 6 were deceived about the nature of the work they would later be provided with.

Certainly the treatment of prostitutes as a monolithic category, characterised by victimisation, can be considered a weakness of the radical feminist position because it fails to recognise the differentiation of lived experiences. Yet, despite the sex work feminists' claims that the globalization of the sex industry is progress for feminism- by granting women economic agency- this fails to account for the way structural factors limit the options available to them. It is widely recognised that the negative effects of industrialization and globalization disproportionately affect women (Outshoorn, 2005; Scambler, 2007; Penttinen, 2010). Thus, by placing the emphasis on individual agency, the liberal sex work approach often fails to challenge the structural conditions and unequal power relationships that can limit women's options. Therefore, the sex work perspective decontextualizes agency (Jeffreys, 2009). One such structural issue is the impact of poverty. This can be seen as one of the key factors to explain why many women migrate and potentially enter the sex industry. Structural changes

resulting from the impact of global economic forces often causes deprivation, spurring such migration (Agustín, 2005a).

This position is supported by Kligman and Limoncelli's (2005) study of trafficking of women post-1989. Whilst they recognise that they are unable to identify established facts, their study does highlight a number of general trends. Most importantly, that trafficking routes generally link source areas of economic decline to wealthier destination countries. Whether occurring within a country's borders or across state lines (Hanna, 2002; Bales, 2003; Kligman and Limoncelli, 2005), trends show that women migrate away from poor areas where they have fewer economic opportunities. Thus, as an antidote to poverty, sex work can become "a form of economic survival in situations where many women have few opportunities for independent financial and social security" (Phoenix, 2007: 25). Whilst it appears true that globalization has increased the migratory possibilities for women, it has also limited their options (Penttinen, 2010). As such, women can become double victims: firstly the adverse economic effects of globalization can limit their human capital (Ahlburg and Jensen, 1998; Hiscox, 2008) and result in increased poverty amongst women. Secondly, after being left in poverty, many have few other options but to enter into prostitution, where their position of inferiority is continuously reinforced by the entrenchment of heteronormative, male hierarchies of power.

Conceding that prostitutes may earn more money than in other low-skilled sectors, they also have to take higher risks in order to do so (Jeffreys, 2009; Kligman and Limoncelli, 2005; Phoenix, 2007). Some women have to work long hours to accumulate sufficient economic benefit to outweigh the potential physical and psychological traumas they can suffer (Jeffreys, 2009). Furthermore, despite the sex worker advocates' claim that prostitution can decrease a woman's economic dependency upon men, many women remain in an inferior power position: financially they remain dependent upon their male clients (Phoenix, 2007;

Penttinen, 2010) and their success within the GSI relies upon them performing the correct socially constructed gender roles. As exemplified by Brennan's (2003) study of female sex workers in the Dominican Republic, despite many women choosing to migrate internally to work in the sex industry, after doing so it is often difficult for them to save money given that their economic success is wholly dependent upon finding a wealthy male client. Thus, in exchange for material and financial gain, women can be continuously objectified and subordinated as the male reasserts his own heterosexual masculinity (Sanders, 2008).

So, the sex work feminists' argument that the rise of the GSI represents progress for feminism by providing women with an opportunity to exercise their economic agency and overcome inequalities, may be misplaced. As their focus on agency fails to challenge the underlying economic hierarchies of power which leave some women disadvantaged and does not question how these structural factors can limit some women's choices. As such, it cannot be said that the rise of the GSI represents progress for feminism; rather the perpetuation of unequal hierarchies of power represents feminism's failure. Therefore, a more comprehensive way to progress feminism would require tackling the hierarchies of power that shape both the economic instability faced by many women (push-factors) and the demand created by male desire, that fuel the rise of the GSI (pull-factors).

Conclusion

In conclusion, it was argued that the rise of the GSI has largely been a failure for feminism. By first examining the competing sex work and radical feminist positions, it was possible to determine that their fundamental difference lay in their conceptualisations of sex. Whilst the former view sex as a saleable commodity, radical feminists understand sex as an unequal gendered power relationship in which women are sexually exploited. This difference forms the foundations for their dichotomous understandings of whether the rise of the GSI represents progress or failure for feminism. As a result, the perceived rise of the GSI has been interpreted by sex work advocates as a progressive step because it has accompanied the increasing normalization of sex work which should lead to the legalization of prostitution and thus limit exploitation through regulated labour rights. Nevertheless, in spite of the apparent strength of the sex work position in dealing with the practicalities, it not only fails to address the underlying socially constructed unequal, gendered hierarchies of power but contributes to their perpetuation. Moreover, it is not apparent that the legalization of sex work is actually reducing exploitation.

Furthermore, the sex work feminists claim that the rise of the GSI represents progress for feminism by providing women with economic and sexual agency; however they fail to contextualise this agency by not accounting for the way in which structural factors disproportionately affect women and limit their choice. It was argued that poverty was one such structural factor. As a result of the effects of industrialization and globalization which disproportionately disadvantage some women economically, they are left with less human capital and fewer job options. Whilst some women choose to enter the sex industry, for many this is less the result of their desire to do so than their limited alternative options. Upon entering the GSI, women can be seen as participating in the dissemination of their own position of inferiority in gendered hierarchies of power. Accordingly, the rise of the GSI

cannot be considered to represent progress for feminism. For feminism to truly progress, these socially constructed gendered hierarchies of power should not simply be accepted, but challenged so that women can escape the cycle of self-perpetuating sexual exploitation.

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